

REGULATORY FIT AND PREFERENCE REVERSAL

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how regulatory fit affects the evaluation of hedonic and utilitarian attributes of products. The results show that promotion- focused people has higher evaluation of hedonic attributes over utilitarian attributes. The reverse is true for prevention focused subjects. In addition the authors also find that “evaluation mode” moderates the effect of regulatory fit on product evaluation. Specifically, we present evidence that the above effect holds in a single mode of evaluation (SE) but not in a joint mode of evaluation (JE). In the joint mode of evaluation, subjects prefer the hedonic attributes irrespective of their regulatory focus conditions.

KEYWORDS: Regulatory fit, preference reversal, evaluation mode, utilitarian, hedonic

INTRODUCTION

Consumers often consider both hedonic and utilitarian product attributes while making choices. For instance, consumers evaluating new apartments would consider its utilitarian features (e.g. 5 minutes walking distance to the office) as well as its hedonic attributes (e.g. a fantastic view of sunset). Research has shown that consumer's choice between hedonic and utilitarian goods is affected by the nature of the decision task as well as situational factors. For example, Okada (2005) found that people are likely to prefer hedonic consumption if the situation allows them to justify it. Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) showed that consumers prefer hedonic alternative over the same utilitarian alternative when the loss of giving up the product is salient.

However, despite current researches in this area, limited research has examined the impact of motivational goals on the influence of hedonic versus utilitarian attributes on consumers' choices. Early marketing researchers like Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) had particularly advocated research on the role of motivational variables to explain experiential aspect of consumption.

Recent research in the regulatory focus literature suggests that consumer's choice between hedonic and utilitarian products may also be affected by their regulatory focus. For example, Safer's (1998) research showed that promotion focused people prefer dimensions like luxury and technical innovation while prevention focused subjects' value dimensions that reflect safety and reliability. Similarly, Yeo and Park (2006) found promotion (prevention) focused people pay greater attention to the hedonic (risk) aspect of brand extension. These evidences suggest that promotion focused people are more hedonic driven while prevention focused people may be utilitarian driven. Specifically, there seems to be a natural fit between promotion (prevention) focus and hedonic (utilitarian) information.

In this research, we propose that consumer's preference between hedonic and utilitarian information may be affected by one's regulatory focus. Our basic hypothesis is that people with promotion (prevention) focus will prefer hedonic (utilitarian) information

because it helps them to sustain their regulatory orientation. This matching of regulatory orientation with the particular type of information leads to the effect of feeling right (Higgins et al. 2003). As a result, promotion (prevention) focused people will exhibit more positive attitude towards a product when the hedonic (utilitarian) features are more salient. We further propose that this effect is moderated by “evaluation mode” – that is, whether the consumers are evaluating the hedonic product and utilitarian product individually or jointly.

The rest of our paper is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief discussion of the relevant literature on which we draw our hypotheses. Next, two studies conducted to test these hypotheses are reported. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hedonic and Utilitarian Consumption

Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). The consumption of a hedonic product may elicit imageries (e.g. while smelling a perfume) internally, containing sounds, sights and tactile sensations. It may also lead to arousal of feelings such as joy, jealousy, fear, guilt etc (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Patronage decisions are primarily based on the symbolic elements of the products rather than their tangible features.

Utilitarian consumer behavior on the other hand has been described as ergic, task related and rational (Batra and Ahtola 1991). It is related to necessity, rather than to recreation, and is often described in terms commonly used to evaluate work performance (success, accomplishment etc). Utilitarian goods are thus, ones, whose consumption is more cognitively driven, instrumental and goal oriented and accomplishes a functional or practical task (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998).

Numerous researches have provided evidence that utilitarian (hedonic) consumption is more cognitive (affective) in nature. In their research, Voss et al (2003) showed that affective (cognitive) involvement predicts hedonic (utilitarian) dimension of consumer attitudes towards product categories which in turn predicted purchase intentions. Similarly Mano & Oliver (1993) also found that utilitarian dimension of product evaluation is more functional and cognitive in nature as it deals with the fulfillment of instrumental expectations that consumers may have for the product while hedonic dimension of product evaluation is primarily affect driven. Thus, there has been substantial evidence ((Babin et al. 1994; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998) showing that hedonic (utilitarian) consumption is primarily affectively (cognitively) driven.

The different nature of hedonic versus utilitarian consumption might have different implications for promotion focused and prevention focused people. Research by Avnet and Higgins (2006) shows that promotion (prevention) focused people base their product evaluations more on feelings (reasons). Building on these findings, we argue that promotion (prevention) focused subjects' experience a fit when they base their product evaluations on hedonic (utilitarian) product attributes.

Regulatory Fit

Research has shown that people with distinct regulatory goals, i.e. promotional and preventional goals, selectively pay attention to and rely on information that helps them attain their goals (Pham and Avnet 2004). When people with a certain regulatory orientation adopt strategies and engage in activities that are consistent with their regulatory focus (i.e., when there is a regulatory fit), they experience heightened motivation and an it-just-feels right sensation (Avnet and Higgins 2006). This value experienced from regulatory fit may in turn be transferred to a subsequent evaluation of an object (Higgins et al. 2003). In their study, Higgins and his colleagues (2003) , found that participants gave the same coffee mug a higher price if they had chosen it with a strategy that fit their orientation (eager strategy/ promotion; vigilant strategy/prevention) than a strategy that did not fit. They experienced the “feeling right” and misattributed the

source of feeling to a subsequent product evaluation. Regulatory fit thus produces a sense of correctness and importance about what one is doing (Higgins et al. 2003).

Other studies have also shown that people react more positively to activities that can sustain their regulatory focus. For example, participants have been shown to be more discerning between strong and weak arguments when the message frame fits their regulatory focus (Lee and Aaker 2001). Similarly research has also found that participants paid more attention to and based their product evaluation on product information that is relevant to their regulatory concerns (Pham and Avnet 2004).

Avnet and Higgins (2006) further showed that a fit between one's regulatory focus and the manner in which the choice was made would increase the perceived value of the product. Specifically, they found that promotion (prevention) focused participants' valued a chosen product more when they were asked to use their feelings (reasons) to make a choice. They concluded that the differences in monetary values assigned to the product were a result of the positive feeling participants experienced when they adopted a strategy that fit their regulatory focus. Their findings were consistent with the earlier work by Pham and Avnet (2004) who showed that promotion (prevention) focus is associated with an increase in reliance on affective (substantive) responses and a decrease in reliance on substantive (affective) responses. To the extent that regulatory focus acts as a filter for consumers to process information selectively; we would expect promotion focused individuals and prevention focused individuals to respond differently to hedonic product information and utilitarian product information.

We propose that affectively driven promotion focused people are more likely to pay greater attention to the hedonic aspects of a product and evaluate a product that rates highly on the hedonic features positively as it is compatible with their affect driven information processing strategy. On the other hand, cognitively driven prevention focused people are more likely to pay greater attention to the utilitarian aspects of a product and evaluate a product that rates highly on the utilitarian features positively as it

is compatible with their cognitively driven information processing strategy. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Promotion focused subjects will evaluate the hedonic version of a product more positively as compared to the utilitarian version. Prevention focused people will evaluate the utilitarian version of a product more positively as compared to the hedonic version.

Regulatory Fit, Evaluation Mode and Preference Reversal

In the current research, we first study preference reversal between hedonic and utilitarian alternatives of a product as a function of the regulatory concern of the individual. I theorize that the fit effect proposed in hypothesis one will only hold when people are presented with only the hedonic or the utilitarian product information (i.e., in the single evaluation mode). In this case, focal product is not explicitly compared with other alternatives and regulatory fit provides consumers with the motivation to prefer the information that helps them to sustain their regulatory orientation. Thus, the fit effect will be a dominant motivation for building preferences for hedonic versus utilitarian consumption in a single evaluation mode.

We then theorize that evaluation mode will act as a moderator for the fit effect on product evaluation. In other words, the fit effect will be observed in the single but not in the joint evaluation mode. Further, as predicted by “evaluability hypothesis” and “attribute task compatibility theory”, preference reversals will be observed in the JE mode. We consider the mode based and scale based preference reversal separately and discuss them underneath.

Firstly, as per extant theory, when the evaluation mode is changed from single to joint, there is a preference reversal as explained by the evaluability hypothesis (for detailed discussions see Hsee et. al. (1999)). This kind of preference reversal takes place when consumers are considering options from the same category with explicit trade off between the two attributes e.g. dictionary with number of entries and cosmetic defects. Further, preference reversal can also take place when options from same category are

evaluated without explicit trade-offs between attributes (Okada 2005). For example, consider an experiment from Hsee and Leclerc (1998) study wherein participants were asked to indicate their WTP prices for one or both of the dinnerware stores sold as a clearance item in a store:

	Set J (includes 40 pieces)	Set S (includes 24 pieces)
Dinner plates	8, in good condition	8, in good condition
Soup/salad bowls	8, in good condition	8, in good condition
Dessert plates	8, in good condition	8, in good condition
Cups	8, 2 of which are broken	
Saucers	8, 7 of which are broken	

It may be noted that set J contains all the pieces combined in set S, plus 6 more intact cups and 1 more intact saucer. In JE, respondents were willing to pay more for set J while in SE, they were willing to pay more for set S, although it was an inferior option. The above option presents a case where no explicit trade offs among well defined attributes are involved. However, the phenomenon can still be explained in the terms of evaluability hypothesis, if I rewrite the differences between the dinnerware sets as follows:

	# of intact pieces	Integrity of the set
Set J	31	Incomplete
Set S	24	Complete

In SE, the desirability of the intact pieces (31 or 24) was probably difficult to evaluate while the integrity of the set was probably much easier to evaluate. A set with broken pieces was certainly undesirable while a complete set was desirable. Thus according to evaluability hypothesis, set S will be preferred in SE while set J will be preferred in JE , given that in JE respondents can easily compare between the sets.

In a similar notion, we theorize about how consumers would behave when presented with product alternatives from the same category e.g. a yoghurt with great taste (hedonic version) versus one with health benefits (utilitarian version) in a single versus joint evaluation. In the hedonic description, the yoghurt is described to have a great taste and made with quality ingredients and available in a variety of flavours. On the other hand, the utilitarian version mainly describes the yoghurt in terms of its fat, vitamin contents and presence of useful bacteria. Since hedonic and utilitarian attributes do not have anything in common (Okada 2005), under the circumstances, an explicit tradeoff between the product features cannot be carried out by the consumers. Thus, to see how evaluability hypothesis can be applied to the yoghurt case, the differences between the yoghurts can be described as follows:

	Taste	Healthy ingredients
Yoghurt A	Great taste	Absent
Yoghurt B	Ordinary taste	Present

As argued above, among hedonic and utilitarian attributes, no explicit trade off between attributes is probably possible as hedonic and utilitarian attributes have nothing in common. However, between the two, hedonic attribute is probably more difficult to evaluate whereas the utilitarian attribute is relatively easier to evaluate. It is also expected that consumers have some range information on the hedonic attribute e.g. best tasting and ordinary tasting yoghurt (Hsee et al. 1999). It is also possible that when evaluating a yoghurt with healthy ingredients, people might evoke norms related to health products which might be beneficial but necessarily not of great taste. Hence, as per evaluability hypothesis, the difficult to evaluate attributes i.e. hedonic attributes will have a greater impact in JE as compared to SE, wherein people will prefer the version which helps them to sustain their regulatory fit. It is also possible that such greater impact will lead to greater elaboration and preference of hedonic attributes over utilitarian attributes (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000) in the JE.

However, a completely different picture might emerge depending on whether consumers are either evaluating or expressing their purchase intention for the product alternatives in the joint evaluation mode. In other words, when the evaluation scale is changed and the evaluation mode is held constant, there will be a different preference reversal which is contingent on the task. For example, a choice (as opposed to rating) task generally favours the option that is higher on utilitarian dimension (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Recently, Bazerman, Tenbrunsel and Wade-Benzoni (1998) have suggested that choice forces decision makers to focus on “should” so that they are more likely to favour more utilitarian options. Also as already discussed, this kind of task based preference based reversal is also explained by research of Nowlis and Simonson (1997), who documented a preference reversal for products between direct choice and continuous ratings.

Thus, when consumers in joint evaluation mode indicate purchase intention as opposed to evaluation rating, the relative salience of utilitarian attributes will be increased due to following reasons. Firstly as discussed above, choice based task favours utilitarian options over hedonic options. Secondly, between hedonic and utilitarian attributes, the former is more enriched (e.g. taste etc) while the later is probably more easy to compare (e.g. fat content, vitamin content etc). Hence as predicted by attribute task compatibility theory, utilitarian attributes are more likely to receive greater weight in choice as compared to a rating task. On the other hand, hedonic attributes will become more salient in a rating task as it is more enriched in nature as against more easy to compare attributes, like utilitarian attributes (e.g. fat content, vitamins etc for the yoghurt) which will loom larger in choice. Further, consumers may also prefer utilitarian consumption over hedonic consumption in a choice situation since it is easier to justify (Okada 2005). Thus, consumers will prefer the utilitarian option over the hedonic option in a JE mode when the evaluation scale is changed from “rating” to “purchase intention.

Based on the arguments above, we thus generate the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2a: In the Single Evaluation mode, promotion (prevention) focused subjects will evaluate the hedonic (utilitarian) version of the product more positively as compared to the utilitarian (hedonic) version.

Hypothesis 2b: In the joint evaluation mode, both promotion and prevention focused people will evaluate the hedonic version of the product more positively as compared to the utilitarian version.

In the next few sections, we report the findings of two studies conducted to test the above hypotheses.

STUDY1

Method

Design and sample. The objective of study 1 was to examine if promotion (prevention) focused individuals would react more positively towards a more hedonic (utilitarian) product. To this end, we used a 2 (Regulatory Focus: Promotion versus Prevention) x 2 (Feature Type: Hedonic versus Utilitarian) between subjects design.

84 undergraduate students (45 females) were recruited from a large Singapore University and paid SGD 5 for participation. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Procedure. The cover story told participants that they were required to participate in two supposedly unrelated studies. In the first study, participants completed the priming task used to manipulate regulatory focus. In line with Pham and Avnet (2004), participants in the promotion- focus condition were asked to write about their hopes and aspirations while those in the prevention-focus condition were asked to write about their duties and responsibilities.

Next, in an ostensibly different task, participants were told that a manufacturer was in the process of developing an advertising campaign for a new brand of yoghurt and we would like to obtain their opinion about the new product. Yoghurt was chosen as the focal product as undergraduates are generally familiar with the product. Prior to the development of the advertisements, pretest was conducted to identify hedonic and utilitarian attributes important in yoghurt purchase. For the pretest, a list of attributes important to yoghurt purchase was generated and 23 undergraduate students were asked to classify each attribute into three categories: hedonic, utilitarian, or not sure. Definition of hedonic and utilitarian was given. Based on the groupings, only attributes that were considered to be hedonic or utilitarian by at least 70% of the participants were chosen. Two versions of the yoghurt advertisement – a hedonic version (yoghurt A) and a utilitarian version (yoghurt B) - were created. After examining the advertisement, participants completed questions on their evaluation of the product and other demographic questions. Attitude towards the product was measured on a three item seven point scale- the yoghurt is delightful/ enjoyable /useful ($\alpha = 0.722$).

Results

Product evaluation. ANOVA with regulatory focus and the feature type as between subject factors was conducted. Main effect of advertisement type ($F(1, 80) = 4.475, p < 0.05$) was significant. Findings showed that the product evaluations were more positive in the utilitarian condition ($M = 5.03$) than in the hedonic condition ($M = 4.59$). No other main effects were significant.

More important, we observed a two-way interaction between regulatory focus and the ad type ($F(1, 80) = 4.16; p < 0.05$). Contrast showed that prevention-focused participants evaluated the utilitarian version of the advertisement more favorably than the hedonic version of the advertisement ($M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.29$ versus $M_{\text{hedonic}} = 4.43, p < 0.05$). Promotion-focused participants did not exhibit significantly different attitude towards both advertisements ($M_{\text{hedonic}} = 4.76$ versus $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 4.78, p > 0.1$). Additional comparison also showed that the prevention-focused participants had a higher evaluation of the utilitarian

advertisement ($M= 5.29$) as compared to the promotion-focused participants ($M= 4.78$), ($p<0.1$). Thus results supported hypothesis 1.

Discussion

Results of study 1 partially supported our contention that regulatory focus does affect the type of information one prefers. Prevention focused individuals seem to be more persuaded by utilitarian information as compared to the hedonic information. The reverse was not observed for promotion focused subjects, an issue which needs to be addressed in study2. Study 2, thus aimed to replicate the findings of study 1 and establish a boundary condition for the fit effect.

STUDY 2

Method

Design and sample. The objective of study 2 was manifold. First, we aimed to replicate the findings of study 1, and build on the findings by examining if evaluation mode moderates the impact of regulatory focus on one's attitude towards the feature types. Two, we also aimed to rule out the alternative explanation that differences in participants' mood and involvement level may have led to the results. Previous research (Pham and Avnet 2004) argued that different regulatory focus conditions might lead to different levels of mood and involvement which in turn might drive the results. This study aimed to show that our manipulations had not affected individuals' mood or involvement level across regulatory focus conditions. Thus, a 2 (Regulatory Focus: Promotion vs. Prevention) x 2 (Feature Type: Hedonic vs. Utilitarian) x 2 (Evaluation Mode: Single vs. Joint) design was adopted. 177 undergraduate students (110 females) were recruited from a large Singapore University and paid SGD 5 for participation. Subjects were randomly assigned to each condition.

Procedure. Procedure and stimuli for this study were similar to that in study1, except for the inclusion of the third factor "evaluation mode" i.e. whether the feature type was presented in a single or a joint mode. In single evaluation mode, participants saw one

version of the feature type i.e. either the hedonic or the utilitarian version, while in the joint evaluation mode, they saw both versions of the advertisement placed side by side to each other. Order in which the advertisements were placed was counterbalanced. After examining the advertisement, participants provided their evaluation of the product. In study 1, product evaluation was measured using items to tap into hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of product evaluation. In this study, we wanted to examine if the advertisement affected participants' overall evaluation of the yoghurt. The items used to measure product evaluation were "Overall, I like this yoghurt", "I think this yoghurt is delightful" and "I am favourable towards this yoghurt" ($\alpha = 0.830$). In addition to product evaluation, participants were also asked to indicate their mood and involvement level when completing the study. Mood was measured using the 4 item Mood Short Form (MSF) ($\alpha = 0.769$) (Peterson and Sauber 1983) while involvement was measured using a 4 item scale (involved/ interesting/ paid attention/strongly agree $\alpha = 0.689$).

Results

Product evaluation. A 2X2X2 Anova with involvement as the covariate showed a main effect for ad type ($F(1,168) = 15.812$; $p < 0.05$). Involvement as a covariate was found to be significant ($F(1,168) = 13.330$; $p < 0.05$). Subjects in the joint evaluation mode had significantly higher involvement as compared to the single evaluation mode ($M = 5.06$ versus 4.76 ; $F(1, 169) = 4.573$, $p < 0.05$). No other main effects were found to be significant. Both mood and involvement, however, did not vary significantly across regulatory focus conditions. This finding mirrors the results of Pham and Avnet (2004).

More central to our hypotheses, the three way interaction between regulatory focus, feature type and the evaluation mode was significant ($F(1,168) = 4.290$; $p < 0.05$). In order to rule out alternate explanations due to mood, we ran the analysis again with both mood and involvement as the covariates. Once again both involvement ($F(1,167) = 13.230$, $p < 0.05$) and ad type ($F(1,167) = 15.248$, $p < 0.05$) were statistically significant. However, as predicted the three way interaction still remained significant ($F(1,167) = 4.038$, $p < 0.05$) thereby providing evidence that the fit effect is independent of the effect of mood and involvement. Results of contrast analysis in the single evaluation mode

showed that promotion- focused participants evaluated the hedonic version of the advertisement more favorably than the utilitarian version of the advertisement ($M_{\text{hedonic}} = 5.67$ versus $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 4.76$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly , prevention focused subjects had more positive evaluation of the utilitarian version of the advertisement as compared to the hedonic version but this difference was not significant ($M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.28$ versus $M_{\text{hedonic}} = 5.21$, $p > 0.05$). Additional comparison also showed that prevention-focused people had higher evaluation of the utilitarian version of the yoghurt ($M = 5.28$) as compared to the promotion-focused subjects ($M = 4.76$), $p < 0.06$. Similarly, promotion-focused people had higher evaluation of the hedonic version of the yoghurt as compared to the prevention-focused people ($M = 5.67$ versus 5.21 , $p < 0.1$). In the joint evaluation mode, results of contrast analysis found that promotion-focused people had significantly higher evaluation of the hedonic version of the yoghurt compared to the utilitarian version ($M_{\text{hedonic}} = 5.40$ versus $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 4.75$, $p < 0.05$). Similar preferences was found for prevention focused subjects also ($M_{\text{hedonic}} = 5.58$ versus $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 4.88$, $p < 0.05$). Hypotheses 2a and 2b were thus supported.

In order to replicate the results of study 1, we ran a 2X2 ANOVA by selecting cases under the single evaluation mode only. Results showed a significant main effect of advertisement type ($F(1, 95) = 4.801$, $p < 0.05$). No other main effects were found to be significant. More importantly, we replicated the predicted two -way interaction between regulatory focus and the ad type ($F(1, 95) = 6.591$; $p < 0.05$). Results of contrast analysis mirrored the results discussed earlier under single evaluation mode. No significant 2 way interaction between regulatory focus and advertisement type was found in the joint evaluation mode.

Discussion

The results of study 2 not only demonstrated conceptual similarity but also overall improvement over study 1. The fit effect was found to hold under single evaluation mode but not under joint evaluation mode. Furthermore, alternate explanations due to role of involvement and mood were ruled out which is inline with the regulatory focus literature.

We also found evidence that there is a preference reversal for the prevention focused people from the single to joint mode.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

For practicing managers, our research has several interesting connotations.

Our study finds that people are more likely to make hedonic (utilitarian) purchases when their hopes and aspirations (duties and obligations) are primed. For example, promotion focused people are more likely to prefer a sparkling red convertible sports car in the showroom if it is displayed in a standalone mode; while prevention focused people may like an utilitarian sports-utility vehicle displayed in a stand alone mode. However, if the dealer is trying to promote the sales of the hedonic car, he may benefit by displaying the two models side by side in which both promotion and prevention focused subjects are likely to prefer the hedonic version over the utilitarian version.

Our research is also likely to contribute in the area of marketing communications. Using the same example of cars as above, advertisers may like to design their advertisements in such a way as to match regulatory focus with the ad type in order to influence consumer attitudes.

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